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Home College Series.

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JOSEPH ADDISON.

BY

DANIEL WISE. D.D.

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And what a young man *may* do in this respect, a young woman, and both old men and old women, *may* do.

J. H. VINCENT.

NEW YORK, Jan., 1883.

JOSEPH ADDISON.

JOSEPH ADDISON was born May 1, 1672, at Milston, England, a pleasant little village of which his father was rector. His extreme weakness at birth gave so little promise of continued life that the good rector thought it best to christen him on the day he was born. Of his child-life next to nothing is known. But his father, being a learned, pious, and conscientious man, is justly presumed to have trained him carefully, watched over the first unfoldings of his intellect, and impressed him with those religious sentiments which so largely influenced his character and career.

When master Joseph was twelve years old his father was made Dean of Lichfield, and, removing thither with his family, placed his promising boy in the Lichfield Grammar School. His school-life is shrouded with the same mist as his childhood's years. Johnson indeed tells a story of his leadership in *barring out* the master of his school. This mutinous method of defying a teacher by the boys taking possession of their schoolroom and so barring the doors as to exclude him until he consented to rescind some offensive rule or grant some favor, was not uncommon in those old times. But, although Johnson believed the story of Addison's participation in such an affair, Macaulay and other good authorities regard it as apocryphal, because of its improbability. In his after life Addison was noted for a modesty and gentleness utterly out of keeping with the supposition of his leadership in such a rough, rebellious procedure. They also reject another tradition, which described him as running away from school, hiding himself in a forest, sleeping in a hollow tree, and subsisting on wild berries until he was found by his anxious friends and taken home.

From Lichfield he was removed to the Charter House

School, in London. Such was his aptitude and such his diligence in his studies that when only fifteen years old he was admitted into Queen's College, Oxford, with a reputation for classical attainments and taste such as many a college graduate might envy. Nor was his reputation unmerited, as reputation often is, but it was the natural fruitage of his attainments.

Merit, however modest it may be, rarely remains undiscovered by those whom circumstances bring into association with its possessor. In Addison's case, accident made his rare abilities known to Dr. Lancaster, Dean of Magdalen College. Some of his Latin verses chanced to fall into that learned gentleman's hands. He was so charmed with their polished diction and correct versification that he determined to do what he could to serve the promising boy. The result of this purpose was to procure Addison's election as a "Demy," or foundation scholar, into Magdalen College. By this election the young student enjoyed the benefaction of its founder, and was eligible to succeed, in his turn, to one of its vacant fellowships. He took the degree of Master of Arts in 1693, after which he remained within the walls of Magdalen, as one of its fellows, devoting his time with unresting assiduity to the study of poetry, especially Latin poetry, and criticisms.

Macaulay makes it apparent that Addison's classical attainments were not general, but limited chiefly to the Latin poets. He knew comparatively little Greek. With Roman historians and moralists he had only a superficial acquaintance. But with the Latin poets he was thoroughly familiar. He was imbued with their spirit and had caught the secret of their style. Hence, in the composition of Latin verse he was unrivaled. It was his superiority in this department, and in the polish of his verses written in English, which first attracted the attention of the literary and political leaders of society to his great abilities, and led to the openings by which he finally attained his high position in society and in political

life. Hence he is an illustration of the fact, that the man who usually succeeds, is not, as Macaulay puts it, "the man who does what nobody else ever attempts to do, but *the man who does best what multitudes do well*."

When Addison was twenty-seven years old he was still undecided as to his choice of a profession. His father very much desired that he should take orders in the Church of England. He seems himself at one time to have regarded a clerical life, not as his duty, but as his destiny marked out by circumstances. His opinions were orthodox; his life, if not spiritual, was moral; his college had rich livings in its gift; his father had influence in the Church; why, then, should he hesitate? Among churchmen little was thought in those times of the need of a divine call to the ministry. Hence he had no scruples on that point. With him the question was, not what God called him to do, but in which profession, literature or the ministry, could he hope to succeed best? Probably his natural shyness disinclined him to attempt the latter, while the success which followed his first poetical publications inclined him to the former. Thus he stood in life's great highway, an undecided man, waiting, not for Providence, but for human events, to direct his course.

While he was in this state of mind two distinguished statesmen, Lords Montagu and Somers, discerning his possible value to the State, desired his services in foreign courts. To this end it was necessary that he should be a thorough master of the French language. To enable him to acquire it they offered him a pension of \$1,500 a year, that he might pass sufficient time abroad to prepare himself for official duty. His college superiors objected at first; but a letter from Montagu to the head of Magdalen College, in which that statesman said, by way of apology, "I will never do the Church any other injury than the keeping of Mr. Addison out of it," obtained permission for Addison to retain his fellowship while pursuing his diplomatic and other studies abroad.

Accepting this unanticipated opening into political life, Addison, giving up all further thought of the ministry, quitted the venerable cloisters of his beloved Oxford, and went abroad. There he was no idler. Improvement, not pleasure, was his aim. Hence he made good and profitable use of his opportunity, studying not merely languages and art, but chiefly men and manners. He gained the acquaintance of many men of note; he wrote poems, letters, observations of the countries through which he passed, and began, as is supposed, his well-known tragedy of *Cato*. But his travels were not without their drawbacks. His pension, after the first year, was withheld, first, on account of the waning power of his patrons and, finally, because the death of King William deprived them of their offices. Thus the latter part of his stay on the Continent was made uncomfortable because of the pinchings of poverty, and when he returned to England, in 1703, his mean apparel bore witness to his pecuniary straits; and the political downfall of his patrons had cut off his hopes of official preferment. His prospects, so brilliant when he left England, were now enveloped in an impenetrable cloud. Still, he had his fellowship left, and, without yielding to discouragement, he again devoted himself to literary pursuits.

One year after, Lord Marlborough's famous victory at Blenheim led Lord Godolphin to request Addison to write a poem in honor of that great event. In the garret of a house in the Haymarket the poverty-stricken poet produced a work which was so satisfactory, both to the existing ministry and the public, that he was immediately installed as Commissioner of Appeals, a place that had been filled by that distinguished philosopher, John Locke, then lately deceased. This office yielded him an annual income of \$1,000, and with it his patrons gave him assurance that it should be followed by the gift of some still more profitable place.

Addison's official duties did not prevent him from contin-

uing to use his pen, and he soon published a "Narrative of Travels in Italy," a work which did not increase his reputation, because it was too exclusively classical in its allusions to suit the gossipy and corrupt taste of the times. After his travels he produced the lively opera of "Rosalmond," which, though it failed on the stage, was highly esteemed in print, and therefore contributed to increase his literary reputation.

In 1705 Addison was appointed Under-Secretary of State. Three years after he was elected a member of the House of Commons, where his maiden and only speech served no other purpose than to convince both himself and his friends that he was incapable of serving either his party or his country as an orator, on account of his unconquerable diffidence. In presence of an audience his mind, so fruitful when it sought expression with the pen, or in conversation with a small circle of friends, seemed stricken with torpor; his wit refused to sparkle, his genial humor to flow, his tongue to coin his thoughts into words. Evidently nature had made him a writer, not an orator. He yielded to her authority, and never tried to make another speech in that House; albeit, Macaulay thinks there is evidence that during his term of service in Ireland he did make several speeches in the Irish House of Commons.

His visit to Ireland was occasioned by his appointment as Secretary to the profligate Marquis of Wharton, Lord-lieutenant of Ireland. To his credit it appears that, while his superior spotted his official career with corruption, Addison faithfully fulfilled his own duties, and left Ireland not only with an untarnished reputation, but also with the respect and admiration of the public.

Addison's secretaryship, with the income of one or two sinecure offices which he held, placed him in more than an easy financial condition. He was apparently on the road to wealth as well as to high political and social condition.

Hence he resigned his fellowship at Magdalen, and probably looked forward to years of unbroken prosperity.

But then, as now, political life resembled an uncertain sea which engulfs to-day the proud fleets which yesterday floated in seeming security on its treacherous bosom. Thus, in 1710, when the caprice of Queen Anne and a sudden change in public opinion swept the Whigs out of office, Addison found himself no longer a prosperous man in a fat place, but simply a politician clinging to the wreck of his party. Some unfortunate speculations had robbed him of his savings, his fellowship and official post were lost, his political hopes blighted, and the haughty Lady Warwick, to whom he had at this time begun to pay affectionate attentions, seeing his forlorn condition, treated his addresses with more than coquettish coldness. Nevertheless, he had the consciousness of his political integrity and the resources of a cultivated mind to sustain him. To friends who commiserated him, he cheerfully replied :

“ You ought to admire my philosophy. I have lost at once my place, my fortune, my fellowship, and my mistress. I must think of turning tutor again, and yet my spirits are as good as ever.”

This, if not a Christian, was certainly a manly spirit. The public soon showed its estimate of his character by returning him without a contest to his seat in the House, elected in consequence of the overthrow of the Whigs. Swift, then in London, wrote to Stella, saying, “ Addison’s election has passed easy and undisputed. I believe if he had a mind to be king he would hardly be refused.”

Four years now passed, during which Addison was constantly gaining in popularity both with the public and the leaders in literature and politics by his famous essays, of which we shall presently write. Then, in 1714, the angel of death claimed Queen Anne as his prey, and George I. ascended her vacated throne. The queen’s departure was

followed by a new election, which restored the Whigs to power. Then Addison's political star grew bright again, and he was restored to his old office of Chief Secretary under Lord Sunderland, who was appointed Lord-lieutenant of Ireland.

But in this hour of returning prosperity he put a fact into his life, which became like a bitter herb cast into a vessel of sweet water. This fact was his marriage with the Countess-Dowager of Warwick. His acquaintance with this handsome widow is said to have begun through his acting as tutor to her scape-grace son. Macaulay says it was commenced by their living in close neighborhood—she in Holland House, and he in a dwelling once occupied by the notorious Nell Gwyn. Meeting first as country neighbors, they soon became intimate friends. On Addison's part friendship ripened into love, and he became her persistent wooer. Johnson thinks she treated him disdainfully, and trifled with his affections. When his political hopes were bright she met his advances favorably; when his prospects darkened, she snubbed him. At last, when he became Chief Secretary to Sunderland, and was likely to become a cabinet minister; when he had inherited a fortune from his brother; and had bought a country estate, she consented to become his bride; but not, as it appears, because she loved him, but because of his popularity as a writer, his recent good fortune, and his increasing importance in the State. Gruff old Samuel Johnson says, she married him “on terms like those on which a Turkish princess is espoused; to whom the Sultan is reported to pronounce, ‘Daughter, I give thee this man for thy slave!’” The foolish woman was so vain of her rank that, though she had taken Addison as her husband, she persisted in treating him as an inferior. Under such circumstances how could either of them be happy?”

Shortly after his ill-starred marriage internal divisions in the Whig party led our essayist's personal friends to desire

his presence in the Cabinet. They pressed him to accept the portfolio of the Secretary of State, not because of his especial fitness for the office, but because of his reputation for probity and his great literary fame. After some hesitation he accepted it, and thus grasped the highest prize of his political life.

For some of the exigencies of this office Addison was naturally unfitted. He could write admirable State papers, but, owing to his unconquerable bashfulness, he could not defend either his papers or the policy of the cabinet in the House of Commons. Besides being in this particular unequal to his great opportunity he was afflicted with a severe asthma. Hence Lady M. W. Montague only echoed the expectation of his friends when, in a letter to Pope, she wrote of his elevation to the secretaryship : "Such a post as that, and such a wife as the countess, do not seem to be in prudence eligible for a man that is asthmatic ; and we may see the day when he will be heartily glad to resign them both."

These words were prophetic, at least so far as his office was concerned. His asthma growing worse in the spring of 1718, he resigned his portfolio, and retired on a comfortable pension of seventy-five hundred dollars a year. Henceforth, he devoted his available strength to his more congenial literary work. But his uncongenial marriage bond, like his asthma, was a burden not to be laid down except with his life.

We have now traced the steps of this poor clergyman's son from the humble rectory, which was his birthplace, to a post in the State so honorable that the proudest nobles of England have regarded it as worthy of their ambition. Chatham and Fox, first among Britain's Parliamentary orators, never rose higher. But in Addison we see a man with no high ancestral connections, with only a small fortune, and utterly incapable of public debate, after only nine years of service in the House of Commons, put in possession of this

highly esteemed office. His abilities were purely literary. Macaulay pronounces his elevation a “seeming miracle,” and without a parallel in the history of England. He makes its causes, however, very obvious by showing that, in Addison’s time, a superior writer, a first-class pamphleteer, was really of more importance to party leaders than a fine orator. There were no newspapers then, as now, to give the orator’s words spoken in debate to his constituents and the country. Hence the Government and party leaders had to reach the people by means of pamphlets, and Addison, having no equal as a political writer, except, perhaps, in Swift, necessarily acquired a political importance which a mere orator might envy, but not surpass. This fact, in connection with his unspotted reputation for integrity, for fidelity to his friends and to his opinions, for humane feeling, and modesty of deportment, explains why “he should have climbed higher than any other Englishman has ever, by means merely of literary talents, been able to climb.” In a period of very general corruption, he was an exceptionally pure politician. His influence was the effluence of his really great character; his power resided in his imperial pen.

Addison’s fame stands, not on his poems, nor his plays, nor his political and polemical pamphlets, but on his incomparable essays found mostly in the “*Tatler*,” the “*Spectator*,” and the “*Guardian*.” But for these, the world would have taken little interest in his productions. And their composition was brought about by an accident, trifling in itself, but interesting in its consequences. When at the Charter House and at Oxford, he had formed a friendly intimacy with Richard Steele, who, on reaching the years of manhood, became a good-natured profligate, whose life, says Macaulay, “was spent in inculcating what was right and doing what was wrong.” This man, whose will was too weak to combat his passions and to obey the impulses of his clear conscience, started a periodical in London which he

named the “Tatler,” in 1709. Addison was in Dublin at that time with Lord Wharton, and knew nothing of his old friend’s purpose until he had issued two or three numbers of his paper, which professed to be edited by one Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq., Astrologer. But Addison at once discovered Steele behind the fictitious personage, and immediately sent him an essay for its columns, little dreaming that, in doing so, he was giving his mind an opportunity to develop the rare powers of which he was, as yet, the unconscious possessor. Steele was no ordinary writer. He had considerable learning. His wit, humor, and vivacious style of writing, though not of the very highest order, were sufficient to command the attention of readers in fashionable circles, but when Addison’s essays appeared in his “Tatler,” Steele was eclipsed. He was sufficiently a critic to perceive, and good-natured enough to confess, his friend’s superiority, and to say subsequently:

“I fared like a distressed prince who calls in a powerful neighbor to his aid. I was undone by my auxiliary. When I had once called him in, I could not subsist without dependence on him. . . . The paper was advanced indeed. It was raised to a greater thing than I intended.”

The “Tatler,” after an existence of one year and nine months, was brought to a sudden end by the caprice of Steele, who acted without consulting Addison. Two months later they started the “Spectator” as a daily sheet. Of this paper five hundred and fifty-five numbers were printed. It was succeeded by the “Guardian,” which, in its turn, was followed, in June, 1714, by a new series of the “Spectator,” which, after the issue of eighty numbers, also came to an end. Macaulay says of this eighth volume of the “Spectator,” which was conducted by Addison without Steele’s assistance, that “it contains perhaps the finest essays, both serious and playful, in the English language.” It did not cease, therefore, through lack of merit, but because the political strifes

of the times diverted the attention of the people from the claims of polite literature to topics of graver importance.

The charm of Addison's essays must be sought, not in their ideas, their style, their humor, or their spirit taken separately, but in their happy combination of good thoughts, a graceful style, delightful humor, and a cheerful spirit. Their thought is neither profound on the one hand, nor superficial on the other; yet fully up to the level of the average cultivated understanding; it is always luminous, seldom commonplace, and usually instructive. Their style, though not always faultless, is a model of ease and gracefulness, ornamented, but not burdened with, rhetorical adornments. It is almost passionless, never enthusiastic, scarcely energetic indeed, and yet it is always vivacious and strong. The humor of these essays is, perhaps, incomparable in that it is, in the main, free from coarseness and vulgarity, entirely unforced, and diffused like the moisture of a dewy morning in summer. His pages also sparkle with wit which, though it rarely provokes outright laughter, keeps the reader constantly smiling at its point. To these qualities is added a genial cheerfulness which keeps the reader good natured, even while he feels compelled to condemn his own follies as they are portrayed by his impassive critic. "Whoever wishes," says Samuel Johnson, "to attain an English style, familiar but not coarse, and elegant but not ostentatious, must give his days and nights to the volumes of Addison."

The ethical value of these essays, proper allowance being made for the times in which they appeared, must be rated high. They are moral satires aiming to make the follies of the hour ridiculous and deserving of the censure of common sense and conscience. As a satirist, Addison is unrivaled in that he is never bitter, never malignant, never scurrilous, never personal. He satirizes the vice, not the vicious man. Still more to his credit is the fact that he never sports with either virtue or religion, but always gives the support of his

pen to both. If his essays do not meet the wants of a religious mind, they are, nevertheless, full of the lessons of practical wisdom.)

As a poet Addison does not rank very high. Warburton said, "He was but an ordinary poet and a worse critic;" a verdict to which Johnson does not strongly object, and which the critics will probably never reverse. He had a poet's nature ; his Roger de Coverley proves that he possessed creative powers, but he was not endued with the full power of poetic expression.

Johnson, speaking of him as a poet, says : "His poetry is polished and pure, the product of a mind too judicious to commit faults, but not sufficiently vigorous to attain excellence. He has sometimes a striking line or a shining paragraph, but on the whole he is warm rather than fervid, and shows more dexterity than strength. He was, however, one of our earliest examples of correctness.

"The versification he had learned of Dryden he debased rather than refined. His rhymes are rather dissonant. . . . The mere structure of verses seems never to have engaged much of his care. But his lines are very smooth in Rosamond, and too smooth in Cato."

With the demise of the "Spectator" Addison's literary career came to an end. Not that his mind was inactive or his pen idle, since he formed the plan of several grave works, and wrote numerous papers on the political questions of the hour. But these added nothing to his fame. Moreover, although repose from the activities of official life gave him temporary hope that his asthma was likely to release its hold, yet that hope soon proved illusive. His disease not only returned in greater severity, but was accompanied with dangerous dropsy. He then saw that the curtain was about to fall on the drama of his brief but eventful life. Resigning himself to the will of the great Supreme, he gave his thoughts to preparation for the inevitable. Reviewing his career, his

conscience rebuked him for some real or imaginary injury done by him to Gay, the poet. To relieve his mind he sent for Gay to visit his sick room at Holland House, and on his arrival solicited his forgiveness. Gay readily granted it, since he neither knew, nor could he imagine, what the injury was. Addison's biographers think that he had opposed his fellow-poet's appointment to some office. If this were it, his conscience ought to have approved instead of blaming him, seeing that Gay was a parasite of great men and unworthy of office.

Addison had been tutor to Lord Warwick, the son of his countess by her first marriage. The young man was addicted to the fashionable vices of the day, and was wearing out his life by guilty excesses. Addison, it is said, on what some think doubtful authority, sent for the gay young lord shortly before his end, but was at first unable to speak to him when he arrived. After waiting awhile the young man said :

" Dear sir, you sent for me, I believe. I hope you have some commands. I shall hold them most sacred."

Addison rallied sufficiently to press the hand of his stepson; and to reply: "See in what peace a Christian can die!"

Not long after, on the 17th of June, 1719, he died in humble reliance upon the goodness of God. His remains were interred, at midnight, with the noble dead in Westminister Abbey. He had lived for little more than forty-seven years. His fame will live as long as men are found who have taste to relish the beauties of style and the charms of polite literature.

That Addison's character was strongly virtuous there can be little serious question. Neither friends nor foes alleged aught against his morality, with one sad exception, namely, that after his marriage he sought refuge from his marital vexations in the wine cup. Drinking was then a universal

vice, and, following the general custom, this great essayist without doubt drank wine, especially when he visited the coffee houses to observe men's manners, to gather materials for his essays, and to enjoy the conversation of his literary and political associates.

It seems that he was in the habit, when vexed by his capricious wife, of going to a coffee-house kept by a man named Button, who had been a servant in the establishment of the Countess of Warwick. "From thence," says Johnson, he went to a tavern where he often sat late, and drank too much wine. In the bottle discontent seeks for comfort, cowardice for courage, and bashfulness for confidence. It is not unlikely that Addison was first seduced to excess by the manumission he obtained from the servile timidity of his sober hours." When in a chosen company of wits, of whom his friend Steele was one, and under the inspiration of the wine bottle, his conversational powers asserted themselves, despite his bashfulness; and long after poor Steele became stupid, Addison, who was only elevated, not overcome, by wine, was the life of the company. How frequent these occasions were, and how far he yielded himself to the charm of the wine cup is not known, and it is not clearly proven that he ever became either a sot or a drunkard. Let us, therefore, give him the benefit of the doubt, especially as in all other respects his morality was above suspicion, though living in an age and among men who did not scruple to use falsehood, detraction, trickery, and dishonesty, to promote the ends of their selfish ambitions, nor to indulge in malignant hatreds, in bestial convivialities, in unchaste connections.

Addison was true, kind, open, honest, unrevengeful, chaste, and, as one may charitably hope, only a moderate drinker. It is also true that in his essays he never pandered to the vices of the times, although he knew that by so doing his writings would meet with higher favor in the aristocratic

circles, in which alone he could expect to find patrons. On the contrary, he made his essays tributary both to virtue and religion. Most surely these facts prove the great strength of his character and of his loyalty to virtuous principles.

His religious character, judged by strictly evangelical standards, is somewhat problematical. That he had religious convictions, that he loved religious truth, that he had some religious experiences, his early poems and his later essays abundantly prove. But he was a *habitué* of the theater; a writer of plays; and a voluntary companion of very worldly men. It is difficult to harmonize these practices with genuine piety. It is equally difficult to believe that his bold advocacy of religious truth and his many virtues had no roots in his spiritual affections. Perhaps these contradictions grew out of his apparently incorrect views of the scriptural theory of salvation by faith *only*. He does indeed recognize the need of trust in the *divine Goodness*; and he occasionally recognizes the Christ as man's Redeemer; but he associates repentance with trust in such a way as to imply that it is in some way *meritoriously* related to the pardon of sin. Perhaps his imperfect theories and the notoriously anti-evangelical, not to say anti-Christian, character of his times are responsible for his indulgences in practices which with clearer light he would have rejected as inconsistent with spiritual religion. One is, therefore, disposed to throw the mantle of charity over his faults, and to hope that in his last years of suffering and of repentance he sought and found clearer light, and complete redemption from all his sins in that precious blood of the Christ which cleanses the soul from all sin.

INSPIRED AND UNINSPIRED THOUGHTS.

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.—ISAIAH.

What man can think of himself as called out and separated from nothing, of his being made a conscious, a reasonable, a happy creature, in short as being taken in as a sharer of existence and a kind of partner in eternity, without being swallowed up in wonder, in praise, in adoration! It is indeed a thought too big for the mind of men, and rather to be entertained in the secrecy of devotion and in the silence of the soul, than to be expressed in words. The Supreme Being has not given us powers or faculties sufficient to extol or magnify such unutterable goodness.”—ADDISON in *Spectator*.

The fool hath said in his heart there is no God.—DAVID.

There is not a more ridiculous animal than an atheist in retirement. His mind is incapable of rapture or elevation; he can only consider himself as an insignificant figure in a landscape, and wandering up and down in a field or a meadow, under the same terms as the meanest animals about him, and as subject to as total a mortality as they, with this aggravation, that he is the only one among them who lies under the apprehension of it.—ADDISON in the *Tatler*.

Knowledge is, indeed, that which next to virtue truly and essentially raises one man above another. It finishes one half of the human soul. It makes being pleasant to us, fills the mind with entertaining views, and administers to it a perpetual series of gratifications. It gives ease to solitude, and gracefulness to retirement.—ADDISON in the *Guardian*.

JOSEPH ADDISON.

[THOUGHT OUTLINE TO HELP THE MEMORY.]

1. Birth? Father? At twelve years? The "barring out?" Another tradition? Charter House School? Oxford? Latin verses and the "Deny?" 1693? Knowledge of Greek? His special gift?
 2. Abroad? Why? Advantages? Trouble? A poem and a new office? "Travels in Italy?" "Rosamond?"
 3. Under-Secretary of State? House of Commons? As an orator? Visit to Ireland? Financial disaster? How he bore it?
 4. New régime and prosperity? Marriage? Trouble? Promotion? Lady Montagu to Pope about Addison? Retirement?
 5. Addison's real power? "Tatler," "Spectator," "Guardian?" Secret of charm in Addison's essays? "Ethical value?" As a "poet?"
 6. Visit of "Gay?" Words to "Lord Warwick?" Death? General character? Faults? Religious views and life?
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